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ABSTRACT

Danger to police is a major premise of much contemporary police training for domestic disturbance calls. Intervening in domestic disturbances has long been seen as the single most frequent cause of police deaths. A study was conducted by the National Institute of Justice to examine the danger faced by police when responding to domestic disturbance calls. Previously, data on all disturbance calls had been interpreted as solely or primarily domestic disturbances. In fact, domestic disturbances make up only a small part of the general disturbance category and, when separated, the data revealed that fewer deaths were actually associated with these assignments than previously reported. The findings suggest that the danger to police in domestic disturbance cases has been overstated. While there is a risk to officers in responding to family violence calls, other police assignments are far more dangerous. Data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and from seven independent studies were analyzed, revealing that robbery calls were consistently the most dangerous in terms of police officer deaths. This new information should help police chiefs revise and improve training for their officers in how to deal with domestic disturbance calls. (NB)

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November 1986

Danger to Police in Domestic Disturbances—A New Look

Joel Garner and Elizabeth Clemmer

Between 1962 and 1984, a yearly average of 90 police officers were feloniously killed in the United States. In 1984, over 60,000 assaults on police officers were reported to the FBI. Thus the homicide rate for police is more than double that for the general population; the assault rate is six times higher. (FBI 1962–1985a, FBI 1972–1985b).

Police intervention in disputes between family members is frequently cited as a routine police assignment that is particularly dangerous. For instance, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) 1976 Training Key on "Investigation of Wife Beating" portrays the danger of such police work:

> Intervening in wife assault cases is a formidable task. The police officer is exposed to the threat of personal injury every time he responds to a family disturbance call....Police officers must be aware of the danger involved in disturbance calls. Since 1966, 157 officers have lost their lives responding to disturbance calls.

Family violence researchers are even more emphatic. Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) report

> [M]ore police officers die answering family disturbance

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From the Director

Danger to police is a major premise of much contemporary police training for domestic disturbance calls. Indeed, intervening in domestic disturbances has long been seen as the single most frequent cause of police deaths. Officers have been well warned of the dangers they face.

Now, a new look at the evidence by NIJ researchers Joel Garner and Elizabeth Clemmer has given us a different picture of the situation. Their study, summarized in this *Research in Brief*, finds the danger to police in these cases has been overstated. Previously, data on all disturbance calls have been interpreted as solely or primarily domestic disturbances. In fact, domestic disturbances make up only a small part of the general disturbance category, and when thus separated, the data reveal that fewer deaths are actually associated with these assignments.

While there is a risk to officers in responding to family violence calls, other police assignments are far more dangerous. Based on analysis of data from the FBI and from seven independent studies, Garner and Clemmer found that robbery calls were consistently the most dangerous in terms of officer deaths.

A good deal of police work and training has been based on anecdote and assumption. Increasingly, it is possible through research to test assumptions against reality. With today's concerns about liability, the issue of sound training for officers is a critical one for police administrators. The information provided in this *Research in Brief* can help police chiefs revise and improve training for officers in how to deal with one of the most frequent calls they receive.

Many police departments are currently rethinking their approach to handling domestic violence cases. Indeed, since the publication of findings from the National Institute of Justice-sponsored study of domestic assaults in Minneapolis, 45 percent of departments in jurisdictions with more than 100,000 population have revised their policies to emphasize arrest of batterers. By giving us new information on the limited threat to officers from domestic disturbances, the research reported here frees police managers to explore alternative ways to deal with these assignments that better meet the needs of the victims of such violence.

At the National Institute of Justice, the value of research is judged by its ability to contribute to informed policymaking. This study meets that criteria by producing information of direct benefit to police officers and managers.

James K. Stewart
Director
National Institute of Justice

> calls (22 percent of all police fatalities) than die answering any other single type of call.

Policymakers listen to such views. Section 1351.9 of the California Penal Code mandates that police officers receive training in handling domestic violence calls, asserting that

> [T]wenty-three percent of the deaths of law enforcement officers in the line of duty result from intervention by law enforcement officers in incidents of domestic violence.

Despite the widespread acceptance of this view,[1] a careful review of all the available empirical evidence demonstrates that domestic disturbances account for only a small proportion of all police deaths.

This *Research in Brief* summarizes a report that provides a new look at the evidence. We conclude that a more accurate estimate of the proportion of police officer deaths that occur during domestic disturbances is less than one-third the number commonly found in previous literature. In addition, we analyze data on the frequency with which police officers *encounter* domestic disturbance incidents to compare the *risks* posed by domestic disturbances with the risks in other types of police assignments.

Police deaths reported to FBI

The most widely cited evidence to substantiate the dangerousness of domestic disturbances is the FBI's annual statistics on the types of assignments in which law enforcement officers are feloniously killed.[2] The graph that the FBI used to report officer deaths by activity, Figure 1, conveyed that "Responding to Disturbance Calls" was the single most frequent category of felonious deaths of police officers in 1977 and the second most frequent in 1976. During the period 1960 to 1984, the "Disturbance" category ranked third overall among the FBI categories of police officer deaths.[3]

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Defining "disturbance"

The notion that domestic disturbances are one of the most dangerous police assignments relies on the assumption that the FBI "Disturbance" category is in great part composed of *domestic* disturbance incidents.

The complete FBI title for this category, "Disturbance Calls (family quarrels, man with gun, etc.)" lends itself to this interpretation; thus, many assume that the elements noted in parentheses are not distinct types of disturbances, but merely descriptive of the range of family quarrels, including those where a man had a gun.

This assumption is wrong. The "Disturbance" category is, in fact, an amalgamation of several different types of incidents, including bar fights, gang calls, general disturbances (short of riots or civil disorders), and incidents where a citizen is brandishing a firearm—in addition to disputes or assaults among family members (FBI 1984c).

FBI reclassification

Beginning with the 1982 publication *Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted*, the FBI added a new table on officer deaths that separated "Disturbance Calls (family quarrels)" from "Disturbance Calls (bar fights, man with gun)." The FBI analysis showed that, of the 92 police officers reported to the FBI as feloniously killed in 1982, 7 (8 percent) died as a result of *domestic* disturbance calls, and 11 (12 percent) as a result of other types of disturbances.

In addition, the FBI reviewed the narrative information provided by local police departments on each police death and reclassified the police deaths reported for the 10-year period 1973 to 1982. This reclassification established that domestic disturbance incidents accounted for 62 (5.7 percent) of the 1,085 police deaths in the preceding 10 years (1973–1982).[4]

Figure 2 displays police officer deaths by crime type reported by the FBI for the 12-year period, 1973 to 1984.

The separate reporting of domestic and other disturbances by the FBI seriously undermines the empirical basis used to substantiate the widespread belief that domestic disturbance calls are particularly dangerous to the police. The FBI data originally used to establish such a point of view, when properly disaggregated, reveal a substantially lower frequency of officer deaths associated with domestic disturbance assignments.

New measures of danger

Before leaping to a new orthodoxy about how "safe" domestic disturbances are, a few caveats are in order. First, homicide is only one type of danger to police. Danger can include other harmful acts such as assaults or injuries.

Second, the low *frequency* of domestic disturbance deaths does not consider how much police *activity* is devoted to domestic disturbances. With an accurate measure of the proportion of police time spent handling domestic disturbances, we could establish a danger *rate* for domestic disturbances; that is, the number of deaths (or other harmful incidents) divided by the number of police responses to domestic disturbances (Emerson 1979).

Third, we need to know the danger rates for other types of police activity in order to compare them to the domestic disturbance danger rate. By comparing these danger rates, we could assess the current level of danger that domestic disturbances pose for police officers.

Need for better data

The kinds of data needed to construct danger rates and make appropriate comparisons do not currently exist.

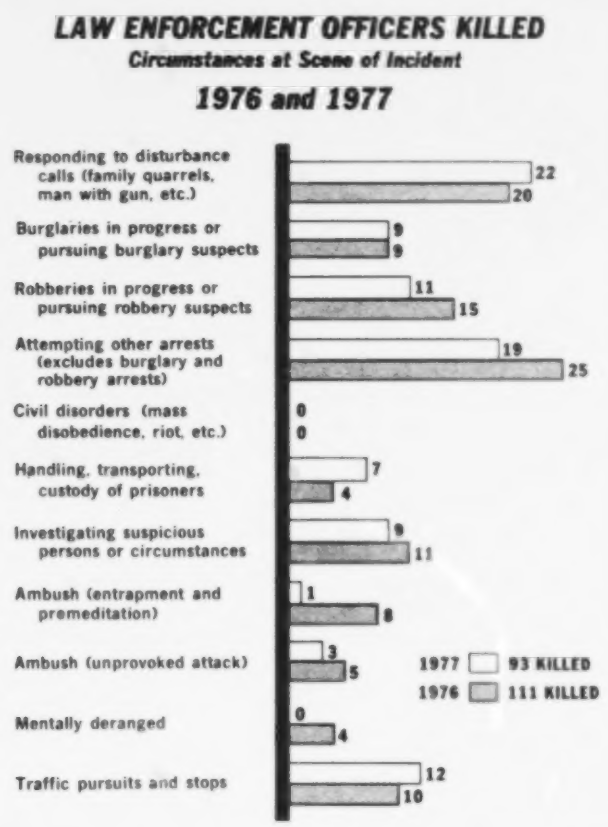
A variety of published studies report the number of police officer deaths, assaults, or injuries by type of incident.[5] Other research efforts provide rather extensive quantitative descriptions of the various types of police activities.[6]

There is no research that reports both the frequency of incidents harmful to the police by type of police work *and* the amount of police activity devoted to different types of police work.

The collection of such information would not be a simple task. In a study of 1,446 family disputes in Los Angeles, Emerson did not find a single officer injury or death. If Los

Figure 1

Officer deaths: Traditional display of aggregate data



Reprinted from *Law Enforcement Officers Killed*, 1977, p.19.

Figure 2

Officer deaths:
Separating domestic from other disturbances

Source: Data compiled from *Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted*, 1983, 1984, 1985.

Angeles is any indication, the rate of any type of danger from domestic disturbances is going to be less than one in a thousand, perhaps 1 in 10,000. With less than 100 felonious deaths a year for the entire Nation, danger rate studies will need to cover multiyear periods or focus on other, more frequent types of harm.

Second, it will require some effort to systematically count harmful events and police activity. Devising consistent measures of officer deaths requires many judgments, including a distinction between *felonious* and *accidental* deaths.[7] Establishing rules for handling incidents with multiple assaults or involving multiple officers or assailants will complicate such data collection.

"Injury" can vary from a minor scrape to a life-threatening attack, and some measurement of the seriousness of an injury will be needed.

Counting police activity has been tried with only limited success. Such efforts have been focused on patrol activity and rarely capture the substantial portion of police time *not* spent on patrol—preparing reports, in training, in court, etc. Potential measures of police patrol activity include the number of calls for services, the number of dispatches, and the number of police-citizen encounters.

In our experience, the greatest difficulty in generating the data is likely to be construction of appropriate measures of police activity (Whitaker 1984). The FBI categories for officer deaths, for instance, have been revised and expanded several times since they were originally issued, but they still do not (and are not intended to) capture the full nature of police work.

Perhaps the least difficult aspect of collecting the ideal data would be the use of harm and activity data from the same or reasonably comparable jurisdictions from the same time period. We argue below that reasonably accurate estimates of the relative amount of danger in different police assignments can be obtained when using existing data on harm and activity from a number of jurisdictions and time periods.

Estimating danger rates

Several existing studies enable us to derive estimates of the danger rate for domestic disturbances and four other incident types. These are rough

estimates and thus should be used cautiously.

The first consideration for using a data set was that it permit separate measures of domestic and other disturbances. This research found eight studies of harm and two of police patrol activity that allowed for this distinction.

Studies of harm. Since 1962 the FBI has published every year the number of police officer deaths reported to it by participating police departments. Margarita (1980a) reviewed every police homicide in New York City from 1851 through 1978. Konstantin (1984) used the narrative descriptions of police deaths printed in the FBI's *Law Enforcement Officers Killed* to review and recode the FBI data on felonious killings for the years 1978, 1979, and 1980.

Bannon (1976) analyzed police reports for all assaults against police that resulted in arrest in Detroit from July 1, 1973, to June 30, 1974. Chapman, Swanson, and Meyer (1974) studied assaults on police during 1973 in 37 rather disparate municipalities in Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas. Margarita's (1980b) review of violence against the police in New York City included assault as well as homicide data but the assault information was limited to the years 1973 through 1978.

The Police Weapons Center of the International Association of Chiefs of Police studied police injuries by reviewing 1,800 newspapers monthly from July 1970 to April 1971. Using the newspaper accounts, the Center's researchers categorized the circumstances leading up to the injury or death. Geller and Karales (1981) analyzed data from 1974 through 1978 on all incidents (108) when shots were fired by civilians at Chicago policemen and injury or death to a police officer resulted.

Studies of police activity. Two systematic studies of police activity are available that permit the calculation of activity rates under these five incident types.

The Kansas City Response Time Study collected data over a 10-month period in 1975 in 56 of the 207 beat watches in Kansas City, selected because of their high rate of robberies and aggravated assaults. Civilian observers rode with the police, measuring response time and corroborating the call classifications given by the police dispatcher.

The Police Services Study recorded 5,688 "police-citizen encounters" in 60 neighborhoods in Rochester, New York; St. Louis, Missouri; and Tampa-St. Petersburg, Florida, during the summer of 1977.

In all 10 of these studies, we found three additional categories (burglary, robbery, and traffic) for which comparable data could be constructed. Six of the eight harm studies had all five categories; both of the activity studies were sufficiently detailed that activity measures for the five incident types could be reconstructed using both published reports or machine-readable data sets.

Table 1 reports the number of deaths, assaults, and injuries by these categories reported in each of the studies on harm. Table 2 reports the number of activities reported for these categories in Kansas City and in the Police Services Study. (Those harmful events and police activities that do not fit into these categories are in an "all other" category.)

From these data we compute an estimate of the danger rate by dividing each category's measures of harm by its measures of activity. Table 3 reports the results of these calculations.

In Table 3, the measure we call the danger *rank* differs from the more appropriate measure in two ways. First, the measures of harmful events or police activity are derived from widely different jurisdictions and sampling methods. Second, the five categories used account for about one-half of all harmful events and less than one-half of all police activity.

For these reasons, the actual *values* of the rates computed in Table 3 are not meaningful. However, it is tenable to assume that the multiple jurisdictions for which we have data represent the *range* of values of these measures.

To the extent that the measures of harm and activity *do* represent the

Table 1

Reported frequency of harm

	Deaths						Assaults						Injuries			
	FBI		Konstantin		Margarita		Bannon		Chapman		Margarita		IACP		Geller/ Karales	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Domestic disturbance	56	(5.4)	15	(5.2)	4	(1.5)	37	(8.5)	168	(8.8)	26	(1.5)	60	(4.4)	4	(3.7)
Other disturbances	126	(12.2)	17	(5.9)	35	(13.0)	68	(15.6)	217	(11.4)	400	(23.8)	168	(12.3)	34	(31.5)
Burglary	65	(6.3)	10	(3.4)	14	(5.2)	NA		NA		62	(3.7)	NA		2	(1.8)
Robbery	174	(16.9)	31	(10.8)	60	(22.4)	NA		NA		390	(23.2)	NA		19	(17.6)
Traffic	129	(12.5)	55	(19.2)	17	(6.3)	83	(19.0)	227	(12.0)	90	(5.4)	134	(9.8)	4	(3.7)
All other	481	(46.6)	159	(55.4)	138	(51.5)	248	(57.0)	1,285	(67.8)	714	(42.4)	1,001	(73.4)	45	(41.7)
Total	1,031	(99.9)	287	(99.9)	268	(99.9)	436	(100.1)	1,897	(100.0)	1,682	(100.0)	1,363	(99.9)	108	(100.0)

NA—not available

range of values likely to be found, the true value of the danger rate is within the range we compute in Table 3. For lack of better data, we tentatively accept this assumption.

We use the *rank order* of each category to assess the relative risk this type of assignment would represent if both the measure of harm and the measure of police activity were from the same jurisdiction at the same point in time.

Interpreting the danger rank

Using the police activity data from Kansas City, Table 3 reveals that, for felonious homicides, domestic disturbances are consistently the *least* dangerous (or next to least) of police activities and that robbery incidents are consistently the most dangerous.

When the activity data from the Police Services Study are employed, robbery is still by far the most dangerous assignment, but the traffic category ranks as the least dangerous when used with two out of three studies of officer deaths.

The domestic disturbance danger index using the Police Services data is consistently low, and the category ranks below robbery and burglary in all three studies of officer deaths.

The Police Services Study has a very large proportion of police activity devoted to traffic, and this explains the variability in the rankings between it and the Kansas City study. Similarly, Margarita's study of deaths in New York City has substantially fewer traffic deaths than the other studies, due in part to the dearth of automobiles during much of the 1844 to 1978 study period.

This variability suggests the importance of jurisdictional and study differences and the difficulty in comparing the *values* of the danger index across jurisdictions; however, the consistently low rankings for domestic disturbances and traffic argue that these types of police work are less likely per incident to result in officer deaths than robberies or burglaries.

The evidence for assaults and injuries to police is less clear cut. Wherever data are available, robbery continues to rank as the most dangerous assignment. Domestic disturbances, other disturbances, burglaries, and traffic shift rank depend on the data source and the type of harm.

Because our danger rank is too rough an estimate to justify an average ranking, we interpret these findings to suggest that the underlying propensity of certain types of police assignments to generate assaults and injuries to police officers is, to some extent, different than the propensity to generate felonious homicides.

Domestic disturbances may generate disproportionately higher rates of assault or injury than some other types of police assignment, but the available data are too variable to justify any conclusion on this point.

The available evidence strongly suggests that researchers and police managers abandon the notion that domestic disturbance calls result in a large number of police deaths. Not only are the numbers of domestic disturbance deaths considerably less than previously reported, but these incidents are proportionately less likely to result in an officer death, given the frequency with which such assignments occur.

Table 2

Measures of police activity

	Kansas City Response Time		Police Services Study	
	#	%	#	%
Domestic disturbance	556	(7.8)	271	(4.8)
Other disturbances	698	(9.8)	642	(11.3)
Burglary	352	(5.0)	29	(.5)
Robbery	127	(1.8)	21	(.3)
Traffic	1,026	(14.4)	1,649	(29.0)
All other	4,342	(61.1)	3,076	(54.1)
Total	7,101	(99.9)	5,688	(100.0)

Implications for policy

It is perhaps common sense that robbery assignments, where the police encounter a purposeful, violent criminal, are much more dangerous than traffic stops or domestic disturbances. Prior research and police training, however, have emphasized the danger in domestic disturbances. The evidence is sufficiently clear that these research conclusions and training materials should be revised to portray more accurately the low level of danger *currently* associated with this assignment.

Although this research does not contribute directly to the debate concerning the effectiveness of alternative police responses to domestic disturbances (Sherman and Berk 1984; Hart 1984), it does remove one of the factors that may have inhibited police managers from exploring innovative strategies in dealing with this police assignment.

When danger to the police is high, safety measures are naturally given more prominence in setting policy. But if domestic disturbances do not generate exceptional danger to the police, managers can focus officer attention on improving effectiveness of the police response to victim needs.

However, we emphasize that the available information describes events that happen in a specific environment, and that environment currently includes a widely held belief that domestic calls are dangerous.

We simply do not know the extent to which the current risk of death in domestic disturbances stems from precautionary measures taken by police when responding to domestic disturbances. Much as the elderly are infrequent victims of crime because they take special precautionary measures, the police may currently be taking measures to reduce the extent of their injury in domestic disturbance situations.

Implications for research

Researchers, like trainers, must first repair the damage caused by decades of inaccurate reporting. Future research ought to emphasize the lack of apparent danger to the police in domestic disturbances.

A second task is improvement upon the danger rank we have developed. We have already noted the inadequacies of the available data on felonious deaths, injuries, and assaults.

Table 3

Harm-activity ratios

Deaths

	Using Kansas City Activity Measures						Using Police Services Study Activity Measures					
	FBI/KC		Konstantin/KC		Margarita/KC		FBI/PSS		Konstantin/PSS		Margarita/PSS	
	Value[a]	Rank[b]	Value	Rank	Value	Rank	Value	Rank	Value	Rank	Value	Rank
Domestic disturbance	.101	6	.027	5	.007	6	.207	3	.055	3	.015	5
Other disturbances	.181	3	.024	6	.050	2	.196	4	.026	6	.055	3
Burglary	.185	2	.028	4	.040	3	2.241	2	.345	2	.483	2
Robbery	1.370	1	.244	1	.535	1	8.286	1	1.476	1	3.238	1
Traffic	.126	4	.054	2	.017	5	.078	6	.033	5	.010	6
All Other	.111	5	.037	3	.023	4	.156	5	.052	4	.033	4

[a]Cell entries are the ratio of harm (Table 1) and activity (Table 2) frequencies.
[b]Rank 1 represents the most dangerous, rank 6 the least dangerous.

Assaults

	Using Kansas City Activity Measures						Using Police Services Study Activity Measures					
	Bannon/KC		Chapman/KC		Margarita/KC		Bannon/PSS		Chapman/PSS		Margarita/PSS	
	Value[a]	Rank[b]	Value	Rank	Value	Rank	Value	Rank	Value	Rank	Value	Rank
Domestic disturbance	.067	3	.293	3	.047	6	.137	1	.601	1	.096	5
Other disturbances	.097	1	.311	1	.578	2	.106	2	.338	3	.623	3
Burglary	NA	NA	NA	NA	.176	3	NA	NA	NA	NA	2.138	2
Robbery	NA	NA	NA	NA	3.071	1	NA	NA	NA	NA	18.571	1
Traffic	.081	2	.221	4	.088	5	.050	4	.138	4	.055	6
All Other	.057	4	.296	2	.164	4					.232	4

[a]Cell entries are the ratio of harm (Table 1) and activity (Table 2) frequencies.
[b]Rank 1 represents the most dangerous, rank 6 the least dangerous.
NA—not available

Injuries

	Using Kansas City Activity Measures				Using Police Services Study Activity Measures			
	IACP/KC		Geller & Karales/KC		IACP/PSS		Geller & Karales/PSS	
	Value[a]	Rank[b]	Value	Rank	Value	Rank	Value	Rank
Domestic disturbance	.108	3	.007	4	.221	3	.015	4
Other disturbances	.241	1	.049	2	.261	2	.053	3
Burglary	NA	NA	.006	5	NA	NA	.069	2
Robbery	NA	NA	.150	1	NA	NA	.905	1
Traffic	.131	2	.004	6	.081	4	.002	6
All Other	.031	4	.010	3	.325	1	.015	5

[a]Cell entries are the ratio of harm (Table 1) and activity (Table 2) frequencies.
[b]Rank 1 represents the most dangerous, rank 6 the least dangerous.
NA—not available

One additional point is worth emphasizing. If our concern is for on-the-job deaths, the current emphasis on felonious death may warrant reconsideration. For instance, between 1973 and 1984, 56 officers were *feloniously* killed in domestic disturbances. During the same period, 65 officers died *accidentally* as a result of their own action or the actions of other police officers.

Whatever measures of officer risk are ultimately deemed useful, researchers will need to produce meaningful categories of police activity that can be used to describe both harmful incidents and the routine frequencies of police work.

Although the FBI's data collection procedures for officers killed and assaulted were not explicitly included in the recently proposed redesign of the Uniform Crime Reporting system (Poggio et al. 1985), individual level data on deaths, assaults, and injuries (with appropriate descriptors of the incidents) should be collected for many of the same reasons and with as much priority as the individual level data on criminal behavior.

Available data on the frequency with which police perform different assignments are amazingly sparse. The pioneering work by Reiss (1971) and by Ostrom et al. (1978) has not been followed by additional research consciously designed to systematically describe police behavior.

What we know about police-citizen encounters in the United States must rely on these decade-old studies or on less comprehensive, selectively chosen samples of individual research projects. The production of improved measures of the risks that different assignments pose to the police should increase the priority of this research task.

Notes

1. Auten 1972; Bae 1981; Bard 1970; Bell 1984; Black 1980; Buchanan and Perry 1985; Cory 1978; Greenberg 1983; International Association of Chiefs of Police 1976; Parnas 1967; Police Foundation 1977; Stephens 1977; Walter 1981; Wilkerson 1983. Among family violence researchers, Fagen et al. 1984; Fields 1978; Fleming 1979; Martin 1976; Martin 1978; Paterson 1979; Roberts 1984; Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz 1980; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1982.

2. For 1961 to 1981, see FBI, *Crime in the United States*. Beginning in 1972, the FBI also published a separate document *Law Enforcement Officers Killed*; this publication was expanded in 1982 and renamed *Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted*.

3. Annual data on police deaths by category of incident are available beginning with the 1962 data. The FBI has published summary data going back to 1960.

4. FBI, 1983b (Table 10, p. 17); FBI, 1984b (Table 12, p. 19); FBI, 1985b (Table 12, p. 19). None of the literature on the danger of domestic disturbances published since 1983 has incorporated the results of the FBI reclassification.

5. Bannon 1976; Chapman et al. 1974; FBI 1962–1985a; Geller and Karales 1981; Konstantin 1984; Margarita 1980a; Margarita 1980b.

6. Kansas City Police Department, 1980; Ostrom et al. 1978.

7. Over the past 2 decades, the FBI reports that an average of 48 officers a year died in nonfelonious accidents while on the job. In 1984, for the first time since reporting began in 1962, more police deaths were attributed to accidents than to felonies.

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